



FEATURE

Personal Writing Habit as a Factor in Forming Authorship Opinions

by Jacqueline A. Joseph,
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ABSTRACT

An integral step in the development, expression, and support of my forensic opinion is researching the recognized and authoritative writings that would explain the causes of the significant characteristics observed during my forensic examination of the evidence.

Herein is a selection of excerpts resulting from my exploration regarding “habit/habitual” in the literature that I reviewed for my commission on a case involving the investigation of a suspicious situation.

BACKGROUND — A case study involving personal writing habit

A threatening note (typewritten) mysteriously surfaced as part of the investigation. One word with a missing final “e” was typed as “thes” instead of “these.” My client asked if it was possible for me to apply forensic methodology in such a way that would result in forming an opinion of common author based on “personal writing habit” simply because, as my client pointed out among the group of handwritten exemplars, various words had a missing final “e.” For example, the word “care” was repeatedly written as “*car*.” The word “change” was repeatedly written as “*chang*” and “made more” was written as “*mad mor*.”

With the available evidence, I raised several questions:

1. Because the documents exhibiting a missing final “e” were diverse in nature and purpose, could the missing final “e” be attributed to a common author?
2. What possible conditions (habitual, emotional, psychological, physical, or environmental) would cause such behavior?
3. Can the cause be identified?
4. Can a feature be defined as “habit” or otherwise explained as the antithesis of habit which could arise from:
 - an intentional omission,
 - an ignored error,
 - an accidental occurrence,
 - a typographical error,
 - a misspelling,
 - a personal spelling variation,
 - haste in preparation,
 - aphasia, or
 - other brain center dysfunction?

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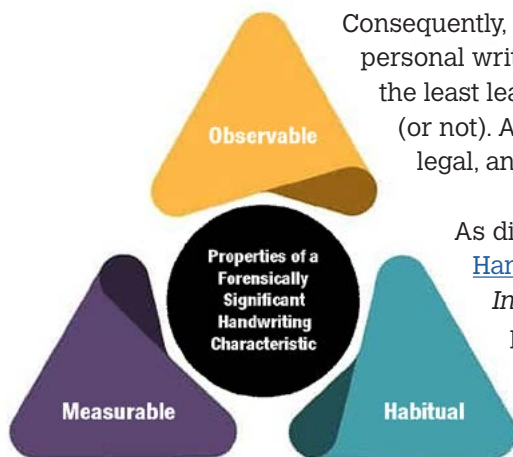
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I informed my client that this query was outside the scope of my forensic expertise because the exemplars did not meet the threshold of criteria for use with my methodology which states that the available evidence needs to comply with the principle of like-with-like comparison, i.e., typed with typed or handwritten with handwritten. This did not apply to the evidence in this case.



Consequently, I offered to conduct research exploring the forensic application of personal writing habit. My thinking was that the results of such research might at the least lead to new, more reliable avenues in forming a common author opinion (or not). After my client agreed, I cast a wide net by researching the forensic, legal, and med/psych periodical literature.

As discussed in my article, "[Properties of a Forensically Significant Handwriting Characteristic](#)," published in *The Examiner – A SAFE International Journal*, (Vol 6: Winter 2019–2020), I apply three objective properties to a characteristic to determine if the characteristic is forensically significant for use in forming a fact-based opinion regarding authorship. These three properties are: **the Observable, the Measurable and the Habitual.**

Habit, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, definition number III.9.a.: "A settled disposition or tendency to act in a certain way, esp. one acquired by frequent repetition of the same act until it becomes almost or quite involuntary; a settled practice, custom, usage; a customary way or manner of acting."

As stated in his monograph "[Handwriting Research: Cast a Wide Net](#)," Marcel Matley comments:

In Scholastic Philosophy the very definition of scientific knowledge is knowledge of causes. Courts determine liability, and liability is based on causation. Identification of an agent from the agent's effects (the writer is the agent causing the effect known as handwriting) is based on determining causation by a study of the effects, the results. The more we know of the factors affecting the characteristics of handwriting, the less likely we are to mistakenly identify the writer, the agent producing it.

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MY KNOWLEDGE BOOSTER

Herein is a curated group of excerpts illuminating personal writing habit which I sourced from books, monographs, and articles in my private library. Many of the works cited have extensive bibliographies which may provide avenues for further research. Each author's biographical notes (hereafter **Bio**) are contemporaneous to the date of publication, and they met my criteria for credibility.

TERMS PERTAINING TO THIS CASE

Aphasia* – loss of ability to understand or express verbal and/or written language, caused by brain damage

Lexical Agraphia* – difficulty in the written spelling of non-phonetic words

*Source: Matley, Marcel B. [“Health and Handwriting: An annotated bibliography of forensic, legal, and med/psych periodical literature.”](#) Third edition. A and M Matley Handwriting Experts of California, San Francisco, CA. 2000.

EXCERPTS

1. de Sainte Colombe, Paul. *Grapho-therapeutics: Pen and Pencil Therapy*. Laurida Books, Hollywood, CA, 1966. **Bio**: Paul de Sainte Colombe, PhD, J.D. Graphological Consultant for Youth Drug Study Unit of the Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute, University of California, San Francisco, CA, and for Patton State (Mental) Hospital, Patton, CA.

1.1 *“To understand the whole complex process, it is necessary first to be aware of what takes place when you write. It is a bit like starting a car motor. There, you see only that you put a key in to the ignition, turn it and step on the gas pedal. But under the engine hood, unseen, a myriad of actions and reactions takes place, bringing into play any number of interrelated parts. A loosely similar thing happens ‘under the hood’ when you take pen in hand and make strokes on paper. Let us examine just what handwriting is.*

“The act of writing is movement – a series of gestures involving rhythm, speed, pressure, direction, etc. Handwriting itself has been called frozen movement because it captures and holds in visible form the slightest motor impulse of the writer with the many contributing factors which enter into it because we do not write with the hand alone, but with brain, muscles and nerves, which, in turn, react to conscious, subconscious and emotional stimuli.” (p. vi)

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2. FBI. "Handwriting Habits Are Basic Factors in Identification." FBI Staff. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 32:7-8, March 1963. **Bio:** FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin Staff. Washington D.C.

2.1 "Handwriting habits are basic factors in identification." (p. 7)

3. Herron, Jeannine, Editor. *Neuropsychology of Left-Handedness: Perspectives in Neurolinguistics and Psycholinguistics - A series of monographs and treatises*. Academic Press: A Subsidiary of Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, Publishers, New York, 1980, p. 331. **Bio:** Jeannine Herron, PhD, neuropsychologist and research psychologist. Langley Porter Neuropsychiatric Institute, University of California, San Francisco, CA.

3.1 "It is the purpose of the study to propose one theoretical orientation about the variability in tactile performance in RD sinistrals, particularly in interhemispheric transfer skills of tactile information." (p. xiii)

3.2 "The brain's activity is aimed toward behavior; to study its organization is to take into account the asymmetric components of the entire sensory-cognitive-motor loop: from the environment back to the environment." (p. xiv)

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4. Hilton, Ordway. "How Individual Are Personal Writing Habits?" Ordway Hilton. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA, Vol. 28, No. 3. July 1983, pp. 683-685. **Bio:** Ordway Hilton. Forensic document examiner in private practice. The sixth president of the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners. Spartanburg, S.C.

4.1 "Any particular personal writing habit may be found in some other person's writing." (p. 683)

4.2 "Personal writing habits form the basis of all identifications. However, few if any are unique to a particular individual. This paper evaluates personal habits and considers the need for development of a unique combination of less common habits as the basis for writing identification." (p. 683)

4.3 "It is a well-accepted principle that to identify someone's writing we must consider all the writing habits found in the questioned specimen and establish that this combination is the same as that in the known writing." (p. 683)

5. Horton, Richard A., B.S., M.Ed. "A Study of the Occurrence of Certain Handwriting Characteristics in a Random Population: The frequency of occurrence of certain class and individual characteristics in a population." *International Journal of Forensic Document Examiners*, Vol. 2, No. 2, April/June 1996. Pp. 95-102. **Bio:** Richard A. Horton. Forensic document examiner Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, Department of the Army, Oklahoma City, OK.

5.1 "It is the writing habits and their occurrence which the forensic document examiner observes, records, compares and upon which an opinion as to authorship is formulated. What are some of these writing habits and what is their occurrence in a random population? Which habits are unique to a writer and which are common or class [sic] to a population based on demographics?" (p. 95)

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6. Robertson, Edna. *Fundamentals of Document Examination*. Nelson-Hall Publishers, Chicago, IL, 1991. **Bio:** Edna Robertson. Forensic document examiner in private practice. USA.

6.1 "Developed writing is the visible result of a series of interrelated, interconnected brain functions which, on command, act with orderly ease to repeat learned habit." (p. 73)

6.2 "Inconspicuous features are the unconscious distinguishing elements within a writing that sets it apart from all other writings. These features are the least imposing but among the most important for identification. The significance of these aspects of writing lies in their inconspicuousness; in their individual peculiar nature; and in the unconscious recurrence that marks them as habit." (p. 135)

6.3 "Learning and action, including writing, are accomplished by interacting impulses in the brain. When these finely coordinated impulses are disrupted by disease, medication, drugs, alcohol, and trauma (including stroke and severe blow to the head), the writing will be adversely affected." (p. 188)

6.4 "While attention is being given to the message being sent, no attention is given to the movement, slant, spelling, or other factors of the writing. In the unattended course of movement, inconspicuous habits will assert themselves unconsciously to announce the identity of the writer." (p. 244)



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7. Saudek, Robert. *Psychology of Handwriting*. George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., London, 1926. **Bio:** Robert Saudek. Czech psychologist and graphologist. Founder of two academic periodicals: one in Dutch and the other in English. Saudek is recognized as having laid out the most comprehensive fundamentals in experimental handwriting research.

7.1 *"These experiments all serve to prove that handwriting and foot-writing and mouth-writing are one and the same brain-writing."* (p. 3)

8. Wellingham-Jones, Patricia. *The Mind/Body Connection: Neurophysiological Basis for Handwriting*. 2nd ed., PWJ Publishing, Tehama, CA, 1989. **Bio:** Patricia Wellingham-Jones. Psychology researcher. USA.

8.1 *"Neurons (nerve cells) receive and transmit impulses electrically and chemically across a narrow gap called a synapse. An important role in how the mind functions is played by the neurons and their chemical connections, the neurotransmitters. Habitual connection of neurons and synapses leads to an automatic and subconscious style of writing and other behavior."* (p. 27)

CONCLUSION

In forming authorship opinions, personal writing habit can be a useful factor to explain the tie between the writer and the written. To support using this factor in this case, and in my forensic casework in general, I research the recognized and authoritative literature in our field as an integral step in supporting the formation of my authorship opinions. 



Based in Portland, Oregon, Jacqueline Joseph is an active forensic handwriting and document examiner with more than 30 years of working with attorneys and the general public.

A double board-certified document examiner (NADE and BFDE), Jacqueline also holds a B.A. degree in secondary education from the University of Arizona and a Graduate Certificate in Business Communication from Harvard Extension School.

Worldwide, Jacqueline is one of ten document examiners certified by the Board of Forensic Document Examiners (bfde.org). As a certifying board, the BFDE maintains accreditation by the Forensic Specialties Accreditation Board (thefsab.org) which recognizes certification programs offered by its ten accredited forensic boards including the BFDE.

In 2020 and 2021, Jacqueline was selected by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) to present poster sessions. Over the years, she has presented 17 poster sessions at conferences, including the 2011 Annual World Congress of Forensics in Chongqing, China.

Jacqueline has published twenty-eight articles dealing with handwriting tremor, disguise, ambidexterity, extreme grips, and other aspects of the field. Find more information about Jacqueline [here](#).

Along with colleague Marcel Matley, Jacqueline taught *The Two Pillars of Individuality and Identifiability in Handwriting*, showing how to satisfy the standard for identification by explaining the scientific tie between the writer and the written. Filmed before a live audience at the 2008 NADE Continuing Education Symposium in Austin, Texas, this presentation was approved for three semester-credit hours at East Tennessee State University Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology.